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ABSTRACT

This handbook is designed to provide school decision makers with a global view of how assessment programs for home study schools are developed. Outcomes assessment (OA) is a required element for recognition by the National Home Study Council Accrediting Committee and hence for member schools. This handbook is designed to enable program developers to: explain the concepts of OA; assess the present sources and uses of student information; develop an outline for an initial OA program; understand the basics of formulating and administering surveys; control the release of data gathered; and understand the linkage between the OA program and continued accreditation. The following topics necessary for outcomes assessment are addressed: (1) pre-study for OA; (2) survey population definition; (3) drafting survey questions; (4) the survey package; (5) handling responses; and (6) OA program uses. The OA program should be designed to stimulate corrective responses to problems while serving as a catalyst for change. An appendix contains an assessment response grid, a sample confidence level calculation, and a list of resources. (SLD)

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OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT HANDBOOK

How to develop a practical outcomes assessment program for a home study school

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PREFACE

In October, 1988 the Research and Educational Standards Committee made the commitment to author a paper on the subject of outcomes assessment as it applies to the various NHSC member schools.

The concepts and outline of such a paper were presented at two intervening meetings of R & ES committee members, along with presentations on the need for and value of on-going outcomes assessment programs.

This "NHSC Outcomes Assessment Handbook" is designed to provide school decision makers with a global view of setting up assessment programs for home study schools.

A note of appreciation is extended to all who have written various R & ES papers on surveying and assessments. Certainly, Mike Lambert and Sally Welch of the NHSC staff are thanked for their significant contributions. Special thanks goes to Mark Godfrey of Truck Marketing Institute, who donated the typesetting, graphic arts and production facilities for this paper.

On behalf of the Research and Educational Standards Committee of the National Home Study Council, we hope you will find this handbook to be a useful and used publication.

Robert J. Godfrey
Truck Marketing Institute
October, 1990

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INTRODUCTION TO OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

The reality is that a handbook on setting up student outcomes assessment programs is not going to have a prominent place on your coffee table or mantle!

However, it is very much a reality that the concept of outcomes assessment has grown in the education circles since the middle 1970s. In fact, it has grown to the point that it is now a living and breathing fact of life for those of us who operate schools in the United States.

Frankly, one of the reasons any home study school which has a long history of success has been its ability to demonstrate to outsiders that it accomplishes what it sets out to do.

Outcomes assessment is the process by which you measure the changes that occur in the students who have signed up for your courses.

If you operate a school of accounting, then how well do you do your job of creating accountants? Likewise, if your school is supposed to create 1,500 computer technicians a year for a job starved market, how well do you do that job? Do your graduates gain jobs? Do they like your courses? Have they learned what you said they would learn? Would they recommend your courses to a friend?

During the past few years, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has made it a policy that when accrediting agencies come up for their periodic reviews, one of they key items that ED is looking for is a comprehensive set of accrediting agency guidelines on outcomes assessment for its member schools.

In summary, outcomes assessment is a required element for the recognition of NHSC Accrediting Commission. In turn, the Accrediting Commission has made it a required activity for NHSC member schools.

This is not just a paper regulation, but rather one which requires that your outcomes assessment (OA) program become an integral part of the management and decision making processes for your school.

If you decide to offer three new courses next year, can you point to OA program data to support that decision? If your OA data revealed serious problems in your student services depart-

ment, what were the problems and what have you done to correct them?

Most NHSC schools have the basics of an OA program already in place, because most of us perform some kind of graduate survey.

With outcomes assessment, you will see how you can professionalize your student surveys and gain more useful data. It will also cause you to assess the desirability of formulating one or more additional surveys to get information on your students as they progress through their courses. Outcomes assessment is also an excellent tool for marketing strategies, for it provides indispensable data on the "who, what and how" of your school's courses.

As you will see in the following chapter, much outcomes assessment data is already being accumulated by your various departments. The challenge, now, is to gather that data, make it available to decision makers, implement necessary actions and decisions, and then see the results of those decisions.

Is there a standard format for every school to follow? Absolutely not! You are the best judge of your school and your students. It is up to you, as the school president or director of education, to oversee the outcomes assessment program development for your school.

To give you some insight into outcomes assessment, we have prepared the "NHSC Outcomes Assessment Handbook." By reviewing this handbook, you should be able to:

1. Explain the concept of outcomes assessment
2. Assess the present sources and uses of student information
3. Develop an outline for an initial outcomes assessment program
4. Understand the basics of formulating and administering surveys
5. Control the release of data gathered
6. Understand the linkage between your outcomes assessment program and continued accreditation.

Outcomes assessment is for all NHSC schools, not just for those applying for accreditation or for those preparing for renewals.

This Handbook will help you get and OA program started. This Handbook plus other resources you will accumulate will help take you past the initial stages to a level where OA becomes a living and breathing part of your school's operation.

Let's take this step towards outcomes assessment together!

PRE-STUDY FOR OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Before jumping into the actual mechanics of starting up an outcomes assessment program, use this chapter to help you formulate your overall plan for your school's OA program.

In this chapter, you'll be asked to consider the following topics as you get yourself ready mentally to tackle the development of your OA program (or the modification and improvement of your existing program).

1. Mission Statement. Why does your school exist?
2. Student Profile. Who are your students?
3. Course Profile. What courses and for whom?
4. External Data. Who wants your data?
5. Internal Data. How to coordinate your needs
6. Validity vs. Reliability. Understand these concepts
7. Outcomes Assessment: Whose Program?
8. Funding your OA Program

Study this chapter and the concepts, then take a few moments (maybe longer) to reflect on these thoughts as they apply to your everyday school operation.

Mission Statement

Start by developing a statement of your school's overall purpose and objective. For larger schools, this may be already on file for periodic review by the management. In smaller schools, it may still be lodged in a small section of the owner's mind. No matter where it is filed, it needs to be recovered, updated, and then published for all to see.

If the purpose of your school is to offer a series of courses leading to the graduation of 1,500 widget repair technicians per year (at a profit!), then why not have that statement posted throughout the school for all to see?

Once the school's staff understands the mission of the school, they can then focus efforts within their own departments to best carry out that mission. From the mail room to the student services desk to the financial aid office to the office of the President, all staff need to understand—and agree with—the school's objectives.

Student Profile

In step with discovering and publishing the mission statement comes a general understanding of who makes up your student body. How much data does your school have on the current student body? Do you have a "warm fuzzy feeling" about your student profile, or are you able to point to data within a database for real specifics?

Increasingly, businesses of all types are creating customer profiles for sales, marketing and product development activities. With a minimal investment in hardware and software, even the smallest home study school can create a database of student information.

Since the key purpose of an outcomes assessment program is to measure the change in your students, a natural by-product of such a study is an analysis of who your students are, why they signed up for your courses, and would they recommend you to a friend. Thus, outcomes assessment is inherently centered around the collection of student related data.

Course Profile

The third element that you need to consider is a profile of the courses offered by your school. An understanding of what your courses are, for whom they are intended, and what the expected outcomes (learning objectives) are is an important element for you to be able to design the outcomes assessment program.

Consider for a moment the following categories of courses offered by NHSC member schools. Think of the differing student bodies and of the many different personal reasons for taking these courses:

1. Vocational, leading to a job with a recognized job classification
2. Vocational, but for personal or professional improvement
3. Avocational, learning for personal improvement or enrichment
4. Academic subjects, whether or not they lead to a degree
5. Academics tied in with degree or certificate programs
6. Courses for Federal, State or military personnel.

External Data

If at this point you have the idea that outcomes assessment is about gathering student data, you are just about right. But gathering information is one-half the battle, for making use of it constitutes the other side of the process. There is hardly a member NHSC school that hasn't been asked for student infor-

mation by some external government agency or trade group. Here are just a few of the groups that may be asking you for information:

1. National Home Study Council and its Accrediting Commission
2. State regulatory agencies
3. Medical or other professional groups providing certifications
4. State professional licensing bodies
5. Industry or trade groups for endorsement of your courses
6. Federal or State enforcement bodies such as the FTC
7. Financial institutions, even for non-financial aid schools
8. Trade or professional groups as potential employers of students
9. Employers

In thinking about these external groups, assess the type of information they will need, how quickly they might need it, and what they are likely to do with it. What restrictions do you need to prevent unauthorized disclosure of information? Is information gathered for these agencies really needed for outcomes assessment?

This last question is particularly important. Our objective is not to set up the biggest student database ever imagined. Rather, it is to gather usable information so we can make an assessment that our courses are doing for the student what we think they are supposed to do. Continuing in this frame of thought, we now turn to some internal needs for data.

Internal Data

The needs for data come from the external demands noted previously as well as your own management needs for information to aid in their decision making process. As we list the various school departments in need of information, remember that these departments are both sources and users of data.

1. Education department and subject writers/specialists
2. Student services department
3. Advertising department
4. Financial aid staff
5. Career and guidance counselors
6. Job placement specialists
7. Admissions representatives
8. Statistics and research department
9. Sales and marketing department personnel
10. Printing and material distribution services.

Thinking back to the earlier comment that every person in the school needs to know what the mission statement is, the above list illustrates the many individuals who can impact the outcomes experienced by your students.

Demanding a high level of student service has long been a trademark for home study schools. After all, we well know that an error in package shipment or an improper address can bring student progress to a halt. Now, however, we need to move up to a higher plateau of service by making a conscious effort to study our student population and assess their specific educational needs.

Properly designed, your outcomes assessment program can provide the information for your decision makers as they move up to this next higher level of home study education.

Validity vs. Reliability

In developing and analyzing survey results, we will keep referring to the terms validity and reliability. Perhaps now would be the best time to develop a clear understanding of the difference between the two.

Validity is the ability of the questionnaire to measure accurately what it is supposed to measure. To check for validity, you need to apply the survey a second time to a portion of a group that has already responded to the survey. This can be done on the telephone and need not represent any more than 30% of the original survey group size. What you are trying to find out is "did these people answer the questions the same way now as they did the first time?" If there is a high percentage of differences (errors), then you have to assess the question(s). If the percentage of error is low, then your survey should be valid.

Reliability for survey purposes is being able to measure the same way or give the same range of answers each time it is used. For example, say your survey results indicated that 20% of the students were computer literate on an IBM or IBM compatible computer. Unless you surveyed the entire group of students, how can you say that of those you didn't survey, 20% would be computer literate as well? The primary way to assure reliability is to be sure that when you are testing less than 100% of an identified group, that those in the survey are selected purely at random.

Outcomes Assessment: Whose Program?

Part of your pre-study is to make a decision or recommendation as to what person or which department in your school will be responsible for the outcomes assessment program.

The primary users of your OA program data should be the educational director and course writers because, it is essential that their course objectives be fulfilled and the desired academic outcomes achieved. Thus, it would be logical to charge the home study director of education with responsibility for the OA program. The actual mechanical aspects of designing and administering surveys might be handled by other staff who are accustomed to communicating with students.

It is each school's responsibility to implement an outcomes assessment program, so designating someone to be the OA program director is essential. It is that person who should be asked to respond to OA program related questions in self-evaluation reports and to demonstrate OA to accreditation evaluator team members.

Large schools may wish to have OA become the responsibility of a research and/or statistics department. That way data can be gathered in a logical, coordinated and hopefully economical manner. However, if OA becomes a research department function, then the director of education needs to have clear lines of input so that the surveys designed are not only functionally correct, but yield information useful to the educational department.

OA Program Funding

Even if you can squeeze out just a few more hours of time from existing staff, your OA program does cost you money. Because of its importance to your school's future in general and to your accreditation in specific, OA must be budgeted for.

You are the best judge of how to fund the OA program. The approaches you may take in funding OA consist of:

1. Appropriating funds from a larger overall budget
2. Requiring support from the educational department alone
3. Assessing departments an OA overhead amount
4. Reducing other department's budgets accordingly.

The data generated through OA is not likely to be a revenue source for the school. You must carefully define the specifics of what the outcomes assessment program is and how it is to be operated.

SURVEY POPULATION DEFINITION

As the OA program manager, an important preliminary step is to define the survey population for your overall OA program. You should survey any group that might have an influence on the objectives of your courses and your school operations.

We will tend to concentrate on surveys of students. How many students are in a group and how many surveys to conduct will be covered shortly. Think now, however, about surveys of non-student groups and how they can be a valuable part of your OA program.

Surveying Employers

Do you have courses that allow employees to upgrade their skills? Many times, these courses are paid for by the employer with the expectation that the outcome will be an employee who is better able to cope with job requirements.

In this case, the employer is the purchaser, so why not survey them? A good survey could probe the employers feelings about the adequacy and currency of course objectives, along with information relating to your student services.

Potential employers of your course graduates may also be good survey candidates. Given a familiarity of your school and the courses offered, they should be able to give you the same feedback as the employers who pay for employee training.

In addition, these employers can give you information "from the trenches" as to the employability of your graduates. This is of obvious importance if you are marketing courses that have vocational tie-ins. If your graduates are not judged employable, then the survey can expose your weak points and allow you the opportunity for corrective action.

Surveying Subject Specialists

For many schools, surveys of students and an inward look at ourselves comes on a periodic basis, usually in conjunction with the launch of new courses or the overall institutional re-accreditation. Part of the accreditation process for NHSC schools has been the review of courses and programs by recognized subject specialists.

Unfortunately, the linkage between subject specialist reviews and accreditation tends to yield defensive responses from schools who feel unjustly reviewed. May it not be time for schools to take a pro-active approach and seek out course reviews from a panel of experts as part of an ongoing assessment of course objectives and school procedures?

Similar to subject specialists are the professional or trade associations who may endorse your programs as recognized training for a particular field. Say you publish home study courses for motel/hotel management and you want an endorsement by a motel/hotel group, what provisions have you made for surveying those in that association who will make a decision as to whether or not to endorse your courses?

Surveying Student Groups

The cornerstone of your OA is a basic program to survey your students. Regardless of how these students arrived on your doorstep, they have come with expectations about the course. They want to learn and they expect to be affected in a positive manner by the course.

To set the foundation for surveying students, you'll need answers to these key questions:

1. Do our students typically enroll in just one course, or are they likely to enroll in several courses as part of an overall curriculum?
2. Are students enrolling with the expectation of gaining employment upon graduation?
3. How long is a student likely to be on active status with your school?
4. How many surveys do you want to administer and at what points in the student's academic experience?
5. Do you want to survey all students or use a statistically correct sample size?

You need to establish the who, how many and when of surveying as it applies to your school. Let's go over some of the previous considerations in more detail.

Course vs. Program Surveys

If you were a school with a four year program leading to a degree in accounting, your OA program would be constructed to measure student satisfaction with the entire academic program and not just on a course by course basis. Individually, courses could be academically correct, but when taken as a whole, the program could be turning out woefully inadequate accountants who'd find a hard time getting interviews, not to mention jobs!

Your mission statement sets forth the expected outcomes for your students. In a four year program you may need to administer surveys several times as students progress through the program. A school with one course will have a simple OA program because that course becomes the basis on which the school will be judged.

Course Length Factors

The longer you expect to work with a student, the more times you can be expected to survey that student. Student expectations can change between the time they enroll and the time they receive that certificate of completion.

The entering student has expected outcomes based largely on what you have advertised or what a friend has told them. During the course, however, the student will experience high and low morale points, reflecting the degree of difficulty in course material, family problems, time management pressures, etc.

Taken to the extreme, the student's attitude may take a complete turn around and result in dropping out of the course.

For long courses, or programs with multiple course requirements, the OA program should employ a number of surveys focusing on the incoming student, the student in progress, the drop out student, and the graduate. In contrast, a school with a course taking an average of 30 days to complete may satisfy much of the OA program requirement with one carefully constructed survey.

Vocational Surveys

We've already established that as time increases between enrollment and graduation, so does the likelihood of multiple survey points. Another important factor relates to the whole area of expected employment by those completing yourscourses.

Historically, schools have had to be able to validate their advertising claims. Now, even if you make no specific claims about employability, you are being asked to document that your courses do indeed serve some useful educational purpose.

It doesn't matter if you are a college offering a physics degree or a trade school training over the road truck drivers. In each case, the school must document that there is some rationale for offering to the public courses leading to a physics degree or a commercial truck drivers license, for example.

Thus part of your OA program needs to include information gathered about the student's overall ability to benefit from such instruction. This is where your surveys of outside subject specialists and employers may be helpful. Mind you, this information is being asked of all accredited schools, not just the trade, technical and home study schools.

Cohort Surveys

Let's say that you administer a specific survey at a given time to the entire student body taking one course and asked for their opinions on course content, satisfaction, etc. Your survey would be poorly answered because some of that group may have just enrolled, some may be stumped at the midway point, and the last group may be feeling great with one lesson to go.

The point is that you need to define who you are going to survey and at what point in their course of study. By surveying a group with common characteristics, you are performing a "cohort survey."

Whether or not you elect to use the term cohort, realize that you need to define the survey group. If an entering student survey is to be done 10-15 days after enrollment, then make sure you can do that on a consistent basis. Other cohort surveys might be at the midpoint of the course and at graduation.

With cohort survey groups, you can ask more focused questions because the group has common characteristics. Assuming that your questions are valid, the results of a survey taken now can be compared to one taken three years ago—as long as the group selection criteria remains the same.

It is this ability to compare results over time that makes the cohort survey important. You can establish result "norms" against which results can be compared and deviations analyzed.

Survey Sample Size

It is recommended that you employ cohort surveys for 100% of your student population. Unless you have very large student populations, this will be the most straight forward practice to implement. It also says to those who may judge you that you do care about each student's opinion.

Your group size should be at least 200, unless the total group is less than that, in which case you would survey the entire group. On periodic basis, even the smallest school should be able to survey at least 1,000 students a year. After all, that's only 20 mailings per week!

Must a school with tens of thousands of students survey each one to get accurate survey results? The answer is "No". As noted by Vincent M. Altamuro in "How to Conduct Surveys", sample sizes under 500 decrease in reliability while samples exceeding 1,500 gain only marginal additional accuracy.

The key to utilizing a representative sampling is to make the sample truly representative of your student body. The ideal way is to choose a system to randomly select participants out of your defined study pool.

For example, say that The Computer School is enrolling 500 persons a month in their new desktop publishing course and the OA program director wants to survey 100 of these students during their first month of enrollment. Over a 12 month period, this would result in 1,200 students surveyed for their first month impressions of the course.

To select the 100 students, construct a pool of random numbers as follows:

1. Collect your group of students enrolled 30 days or less
2. Create a pool of 500 numbers, say from 1 to 500
3. In random fashion, assign each student a number from 1 to 500
4. Draw from your pool 100 numbers in a random fashion
5. Survey students whose numbers correspond to the drawn numbers.

Done on a monthly basis, this random selection process could be performed manually—literally, like drawing for raffle prizes! Obviously, computer programs can accomplish the same thing. Given the use of the random selection on a monthly basis, coupled with the compilation of results over a 12 month period, you should have very reliable statistics.

While The Computer School's survey of 1,200 students per year would yield statistically correct responses, what extra cost would be incurred to survey the entire 6,000 students?

Think about it. All of the time and money you've invested in designing the survey is overhead and changes little with the size of survey population. Your incremental expenses involved are those for a longer press run (more forms), postage, and extra time for mailing and data collection purposes.

Regardless of which approach you take, the time and effort that it takes to formulate and execute a student survey cannot be underestimated. As you will find out in our next chapter, the construction of your survey questions will have as much or more affect on the reliability of the data gathered than the sheer numbers of responses.

In short, put your effort into designing a well thought out survey. Then, whether your sample size is 100% or 10% of the population, your results should be accurate.

DRAFTING SURVEY QUESTIONS

Up to this point, much of our discussion has centered around the basic planning for surveys. Without understanding the goals and objectives of our schools, we cannot be expected to develop the objectives for a student survey program.

In this chapter on designing your survey questions, we will cover the following topics:

1. Open-End Questions
2. Closed-End Questions
3. Graphic Responses
4. Other Question Types
5. Topic Selection
6. Draft Questionnaires

Now, its time to cover the basics of putting together a survey. The first step consists is to draft your questions, which requires a basic knowledge of the types of questions.

To a person preparing a test, we would call them objective and essay questions with "x" number of possible answers. To the preparer of a survey, they are called "closed-end" and "open-end" questions which are dichotomous (two answers), trichotomous (three answers), etc.

Much of this Handbook's material on the mechanics of developing surveys is based on the previously referenced "How to Conduct Surveys" by Vincent M. Altamuro. This is a book covering some 36 steps to conducting a survey and is highly recommended reading.

Open-End Questions

As with the essay question on a test paper, open-end questions allow the responder to express opinions and feelings that might not be revealed by the list of possible answers found in close-end questions.

Consider the question: "Tell us why you want to become an over-the-road truck driver?"

You could have a wide range of answers, ranging from wanting to feel the wide open spaces, to making a better living, to wanting to work on your own, etc.

As an open-end question, it allows a wide variety of answers. Imagine, however, if you had to develop a list of answers to make it a close-end type!

Properly thought out and pre-tested, your open-end questions should be able to elicit a predictable range of responses which will allow comparison of answers from one study group to another.

In constructing open-end questions, be aware of the several types of response mechanisms that can be used, including:

1. Sentence completion to examine ideas or to recall data
2. Recognition, to test if a message was received
3. Essay, to encourage open responses
4. Listing of ideas or items, with or without a ranking.

The open-end question can add a personalizing touch to a survey dominated by closed-end "mark the bubble of the closest answer" questions. But, because it is personal, make sure that you have the capacity for a personal review of those answers, if only to be able to quickly ascertain the answers that fall out of the expected range.

Closed-End Questions

The closed-end question format forces the survey subject to choose one or more answers from a list of answers.

The simplest form of closed-end question asks one to choose between two possible answers. This is a dichotomous question, typically with "yes/no" or "true/false" possibilities. Most of us hesitate when answering these type of questions. We want to be able to qualify and expand upon the answer, rather than having our choices limited.

As you would with test item construction, limit the use of true/false, yes/no survey questions. Emphasize the use of multiple choice questions, preferably ones asking the respondent to choose the one best answer.

The closed-end style question has a variety of sub-types, beyond the variation in numbers of answers to a multiple-choice type question. Consider the following ways of presenting closed-end questions:

1. Best guess type, choosing from a list of items.
2. Pick any or all answers that you feel are correct
3. Rank your answers on a scale
4. Choose the picture that represents your answer
5. Assign a preference number to each item
6. Which number expresses your feelings on this scale

Graphic Responses

The NHAW Home Institute asks students to assess courses by marking an assessment grid with "time and money invested" as one axis and "benefits" on the other axis. Data can be compiled on a master grid for each group. It's an interesting assessment form, see Appendix for an example.

Other Question Types

Again referring to "How to Conduct Surveys," here is a brief synopsis of other types of questions that can be used in surveys. Think of these from the standpoint of how your question can be constructed to extract from the respondent the answers you are seeking.

Situational questions present some sort of situation or set of circumstances to the participant, and then ask for an answer based on those circumstances. Such a question could be either open-end or closed-end design, for example:

"Suppose our school mailed you a set of study material for a course which you are not studying. How would you notify us about the error?"

In response, the person could check items from a list of choices (closed-end), or could simply state what they would do in a short sentence (open-end).

Follow-up questions are sometimes used to further examine a topic for which you feel it is important to have highly accurate answers. Thus, you are covering that topic with more than one question. This can also allow you to compare answers for the questions to examine the validity of the questions.

Topic Selection

Before writing the actual survey questions, make a list of the topics that you want covered in conjunction with the overall objectives of the survey. Remind yourself that you are surveying to document student outcomes.

Having made your list of preliminary survey topics, think about how you want the topics and questions organized. Some factors you may want to consider are:

1. Do you want to group according to subject matter?
2. Which topics are going to be more difficult to answer?
3. What question format would you tend to employ?
4. How many answers are likely to be dependent on other answers?
5. Are these topics covering the areas you feel necessary?
6. If you were a student, how would you react to these topics?

Draft Surveys

Now, armed with a basic knowledge of question types and with a good idea of the topics you want to cover, it's time to start writing your survey questions!

Over the years, any number of NHSC sponsored workshops have covered the "how to" aspects of writing test questions and overall test presentation to the student. Make use of those principles as you write your survey questions.

Keep in mind the following "Do's and Don'ts" of survey construction. (Source: NHSC R & ES Subcommittee on Graduate Surveys Outline presented August, 1986)

1. Be sure directions are clear and concise. Then, assume that the directions will not be read by a percentage of respondents.
2. Avoid negatively worded questions.
3. Don't bias answers with slanted questions.
4. Don't ask questions for which you already know the answers—unless you're seeking validate those particular answers.
5. Don't ask questions outside the survey focus or objectives.
6. Don't place the most important questions at the end of the survey.
7. Begin with some non-threatening questions.
8. Ask questions of a general nature before those of a specific nature.
9. Avoid asking questions requiring moral or ethical judgments.
10. Ask one question at a time.
11. Keep question wording simple and direct.
12. Ask questions that will allow the student to express feelings about the school and the value of the program.
13. Leave sufficient space for answering open-end style questions.
14. Don't ask questions not appropriate for the particular cohort group. For example, new enrollees can't answer questions on how the course has helped them gain employment.
15. Underscore, capitalize or italicize crucial words or phrases for emphasis.

At this point, concentrate your efforts on effective question construction. Don't worry too much about the format of the survey or whether you should have made a particular question an open-end or closed-end type.

Once you've written your questions, check them for consistency with the topics you've selected and the overall objectives for the survey. Having done that, move on to the next phase, which is developing the actual survey package.

THE SURVEY PACKAGE

So now you've become the author of the survey that is going to document everything you need to know about student outcomes for your school!

Now that you've spent your abilities on the draft questionnaire, you know very well that it's time for someone else to tear it apart. We know that pride of authorship is great, but we also understand (and may appreciate) the role of the copy editor and the blue pencil.

In designing the survey package, you'll find us covering the following points:

1. Copy Feedback
2. Format Basics
3. The Cover Letter
4. Envelopes
5. Incentives
6. Distribution
7. Tabulating Results

Copy Feedback

Once you feel that your questions have been polished, turn them over to one or more staff people for their review. Be sure to give them a copy of the survey objectives and topics, so they can give you beneficial feedback.

At the same time, solicit input over the survey length, the types of questions, the readability and clarity, and the overall flow. You could also ask for opinions as to format and printing ideas, internal processing requirements, etc.

Format Basics

Another key element to a successful survey lies in the format used. Assuming the use of the print medium, how are the questions to be laid out? What type size is to be used? How many pages are required? How is the survey to be mailed and responses received?

These production type questions are the province of graphic arts specialists. More and more, this function is being brought back in-house by "desktop publishing" techniques, but the graphics principles remain the same. Consider the following aspects in survey format design:

1. **Eye Appeal.** The form may take on a somewhat official look to convey importance of response. Soften this look by using a paper stock and color that gives some warmth—perhaps an off-white or lightly tinted blue or green. Avoid using bright colors such as bright white, yellow, etc.
2. **Group Topics.** You may want to have questions grouped according to department function within your school. Provide also a section for the student to comment on anything not specifically mentioned in the survey. You may also want to ask for suggestions for future courses or to ask in what courses might the individual be interested in for the future purchase.
3. **Limit Questions.** All the questions you would like to ask the student cannot be answered in 5-10 minutes. You want to maximize your response rate while still being able to garner useful information. Remember, your focus is outcomes. Other departments can conduct their own surveys as needed.
4. **Page Limit.** Time required to complete the survey is important. Aim for a five minute completion time and accept nothing more than 10 minutes. Limit your survey form to two sides of an 11" x 17" piece of paper—the equivalent of four standard pages. It must look like it can be completed quickly.
5. **Use Artwork.** Art may be used to convey friendliness, highlight groupings, emphasize instructions, etc. Artwork consumes space, so use it with a purpose in mind.
6. **Typeset Copy.** Make sure the survey form is typeset. A properly chosen type style and size can conserve valuable form space and increase readability. It also gives you graphic elements like check-off boxes and circles for answers.
7. **White Space.** Along with typestyle, make proper use of white space to reduce the intimidation factor. Coordinate white space with the line spacing (leading) between lines of copy, column and line lengths and extra space between groups of questions. Design and maintain a specified white border on each page of the survey.
8. **Response Codes.** Upon receipt of the completed survey, results will have to be tallied by someone. Provide a coding scheme for the responses. You need not even number the questions, just as long as the answers are numbered. Make use of your typesetter's skills for implementing this.
9. **Student Signature.** Emphasize in the survey instructions that student's must sign the survey in order to be assured of a credible response. In your instructions, you will have already told the student the purpose of the survey and that the information will be held confidential.
10. **Student Code.** Provide some sort of code on the form so you can identify it when it comes back. Remember, you may be using the same survey for students in a number of different courses. To correctly tabulate and interpret results, you need to be able to identify the proper cohort groups.

The Cover Letter

While your graphics person is working on basic survey format, give some thought to the other elements required in the survey package. One key item is the cover letter to explain the purpose of the survey.

You must sell the recipient on the importance of completing the survey. Before you design the appearance of the letter, look at the substance of the letter.

Your survey is to assess student outcomes, but the student need not understand that particular terminology. Make this a "good news letter" ! Here is an opportunity for the student to express opinions that will help you maintain and create courses that are right on target with the needs of the students.

Do most of your communications with students consist of preprinted memos, notices and form letters? If so, make this a contrasting form of communication by having each letter individually word processed and signed by either yourself or the school president.

Use a good quality bond letterhead, perhaps of the "executive" size which is somewhat smaller than standard. Perhaps you have letterhead that is already preprinted with "from the Office of the President" or "from the Educational Department." Letterhead using the NHSC approved logomark would be a nice touch!

Keep your message brief, to the point, and action oriented. Your job is to sell the student on the idea that completing this survey right now is at least as important as the original decision to sign up for the course.

Envelopes

After all the work you've done, don't jeopardize your efforts with poorly conceived outbound and inbound envelopes.

The outbound envelope should resemble but not be identical to your school's standard business size envelope. It needs to look special to the student and give the impression of importance.

Perhaps it can be made of bond or linen style paper. If you normally use black ink on white stock, why not try something a little classier, like a deep burgundy on an off-white paper?

However, you don't want to look like a direct mail piece! Try to have each address individually typed and postage affixed by stamp or by your meter. Slogans such as "important" or "open me" or "reply requested" do not typically increase the "open" rate.

Assuming the student is to respond by returning a printed survey via the mails, consider your form of reply envelope. Why not mimic your outbound envelope design and create an important looking reply (inbound) envelope?

You have personally asked for the student's help in completing the question, so why not create a reply envelope addressed to your attention? All you need is your name, school and address on an envelope, along with a stamp for the return postage.

Why a stamp and not a meter imprint or business reply envelope? Direct mail experts indicate that the stamp is viewed as a personal touch with value and that not using the envelope would be a waste of good money!

Incentives

How would you like to double the response rate of your survey? Why not consider some kind of incentive like a quarter ("for a cup of coffee") or a new dollar bill ("for your valuable time")?

In a controlled experiment cited in "Dartnell's Direct Mail and Mail Order Handbook" by Richard S. Hodgen, response rates for either initial or follow-up mailings were dramatically increased by the use of incentives.

Groups of 200 executives were mailed identical survey packages, with the only variable being the question of the incentive. The response to the first mailing was as follows:

Group	Incentive	First Mailing Response
Group 1	None	23%
Group 2	Quarter	40%
Group 3	Dollar	54%

Subsequently, a follow-up mailing was done on each group, this time adding a dollar to Group 1 and omitting the incentives from Groups 2 and 3. Here were the results:

Group	Incentive	Follow-Up Response
Group 1	Dollar	27%
Group 2	Nothing	3%
Group 3	Nothing	6%

In combining the responses from the two mailings, the role of incentives is clearly indicated:

Group	Incentive	Total Response
Group 1	0 + Dollar	50%
Group 2	Quarter + 0	43%
Group 3	Dollar + 0	60%

In developing your survey program, why not consider a similar test using incentives? Yes, the incentive increases the cost of your initial mailing. But, weigh that against the added costs of a follow-up mailing. If you were to get a 50% response the first time around, why not call your response rate a success and skip the second mailing!

Pre-Testing

Don't miss the benefits that accrue by pre-testing not only the questionnaire itself, but all of the components in the package. Adopt the rationale that until you've cleared a pre-test, the whole project is still in the draft stage.

Start by having a small number of key employees complete the survey. They should not have been involved with the development of the questions, but should have enough experience with the school to make judgments as to how the questionnaire would be received by the students.

The purpose of the pre-test is to find typographical errors, confusion in interpreting directions, mis-interpretation of questions, etc. What you need is feedback, so make sure that you designate a time to bring your test group in to get their comments.

Assess your comments, make your final adjustments to the survey package, and then start the distribution process.

Distribution

How you distribute the survey depends on your type of school and to whom the survey is being sent. Surveys completed as part of a classroom activity naturally have the highest percentage of return, while post-graduate employment status surveys sent to someone 12 months after graduation are likely to have a low return.

If you operate strictly in the correspondence mode, mailing of surveys is likely to be preferred. A survey of student characteristics at time of enrollment approval can serve as both a gatherer of data and as a welcome to the school. To save money, many schools prefer to enclose a graduate survey with the last package of materials. Experience will show them whether that achieves a higher return percentage than a separate mailing after graduation.

Schools with combination programs should survey both their correspondence and resident programs. Naturally, a survey distributed on the last day of resident instruction will have a very high return percentage. It also serves as a time when the school can emphasize to the new graduate the importance of staying in touch with the school and completing any subsequent surveys that will be sent.

We have schools that are either now or will soon be administering testing via a computer link. These schools should find an electronic survey a natural extension of the testing package. As the student completes the survey, results could automatically be transferred to the school's data base of survey statistics!

If you feel that mailing surveys to students is the preferred approach, please consider two important service considerations for the U.S. mails:

1. Use first class mail. It expedites service, says the mailing is important, and is forwardable if the student has changed addresses (and has left a change of address request).
2. Include the endorsement "Forwarding and Address Correction Requested" below your return address. This will allow the piece to be forwarded if necessary and you'll be provided with the corrected address. Without this endorsement, mail will be forwarded but you won't know of the new address.

Now that your survey is started, take the steps needed to process the returns!

HANDLING RESPONSES

Tabulating Results

Tabulating results from your surveys can be as complex as your survey and school conditions warrant. A small school with one course using a graduate survey could probably tabulate results manually. Naturally, the large schools will have to make use of their data processing facilities.

Here are some key points in setting up your survey tabulation system.

1. **Separate by groups.** Even in a small school, you could be receiving results from two or three surveys each day. Answer sheets that have been pre-coded or color coded facilitate this process.
2. **Tabulate answers.** For each survey group, post to your system the answers from each sheet. Again, this might be a simple as a hand-posted tally sheet or as complicated as reading "Scantron style" answer sheets into a scanner.
3. **Tally responses.** You should be able to account for all the pieces that were sent out in a mailing. Your total will include (A) completed surveys returned, (B) pieces returned because of no forwarding address, and (C) the balance will be non-returned and non-completed.
4. **Second mail list.** If you do a follow-up mailing, then you need a list that reflects the original survey group, less those who completed the survey on the first mailing.
5. **Tally second mailing.** This amounts to a repeat of the three steps noted above.
6. **Combine mailing stats.** At this point, combine the results of the two mailings and summarize the results.
7. **Publish the statistics.** Without interpreting the results, document the results of the survey for your analysis team to review. Your raw numbers and any attendant percentages should be based on the number of responses, not on the total number of surveys. How many surveys were returned is, however, information that could be useful in interpreting results.

The survey has been mailed, the raw results tabulated. Now, what interpretations can you make about this data? That is the topic of our next topic.

Our sole reason for a surveying students is to gain information about those students. That information (student outcomes) can then be made part of our decision making process affecting the management, educational direction and overall operation of our schools.

In forming your plan for analyzing survey results, consider the following steps and practices.

Validity Testing

Test results for validity. Although this should have been done in your pre-test, take a percentage of the surveys (say 20%) and telephone the respondents to check their answers. A high percentage of deviations would indicate problems with the validity of the survey. Once you have established validity, this test process need not be repeated.

Confidence Levels

Suppose your survey indicates that 60% of respondents would recommend your school to a friend. How can you be sure that 60% of those who did not respond to the survey would indeed have the same feeling?

Unless almost 100% of a randomly selected group responds to almost every question (or a similar parallel when surveying an entire population), there is a reduction in the confidence that we have in the survey results.

Pollsters quote a margin of error when releasing survey results. What you may wish to do is to calculate your own margin of error using the procedure in the Appendix. At a 95% level of confidence and using a response size of 1,000, for example, the 60% figure noted about would be accurate to within plus or minus 3.0%.

Linking Results

Does your survey have a number of questions where you think the answers for one question may influence the answer on another? If so, you are trying to establish some kind of linkage (or correlation) between the two.

Unless you wish to enter into formal correlation analysis of the questions involved, your best approach in analyzing linkage is to refer to appearances of linkage rather than make explicit statements to that effect.

Say, you noticed a trend that student's who have completed two years of college show a better graduation rate than those with just a high school education. Unless you are willing to perform a specific correlation analysis on those items, treat that outcome as an observed but not statistically qualified trend.

Can you use these observations in your decision making process? Of course. They may not be statistically perfect, but then you have most likely been doing that for years anyway, haven't you?

A common use of linking is to compare survey results over a period of time. For example, if you administer an entering student survey to 200 students each month, you should observe common responses after several surveys. Indeed, one of the best things you can do is to establish a set of normal response values and compare those against the results of a current survey. This can let you highlight deviations from the norm that might require corrective action.

Comparing Surveys

One of the final uses of survey statistics is to compare the answers to key questions of surveys administered at different points in the students career.

Student attitudes may have undergone a change in the period between enrollment and completion. They may have been thrilled with your student services at the 30 day point, but can't stand the instructor after 30 months! Attitudes about employment outlooks might change with time, etc.

Once again, we are studying student outcomes, which is the change that the student undergoes as a result of our program of instruction. While one survey administered at the end of the course may be able to extract this information from the student, it would be better to consider the use of two or three surveys with similar questions appearing in each survey.

OA PROGRAM USES

The whole purpose of outcomes assessment is to document educational achievement within your school and to affirm that as an institution you are doing what you say you are intending to do.

Historically, many schools have performed this type of assessment on a schedule determined by their accrediting body—typically at the five year renewal point!

In essence, we are now being asked to perform this type assessment on at least a yearly basis. Further, you are being asked to integrate the results of your OA program into your school's decision making process.

Using OA Program Data

Consider the following ways that you can make use of OA data:

1. **Course objectives validation.** You must state the objectives for every course. Survey results should confirm your assessment of objectives or tell what needs revision.
2. **Student service performance.** How do results compare against your stated service objectives? If instructors are to contact students three times during a course, do the results confirm that? Do the students receive study materials in the proper order? What services should you be providing?
3. **Accreditation requirements.** Revised NHSC standards for self-evaluation reports will require disclosure of information that is best gathered through your OA program.
4. **Accrediting examiners.** Your peers who make visits to your school on accreditation site visits will be charged with reviewing what your OA program consists of, how it is operating, and what role it plays in your school's decision making process.
5. **Validating advertising claims.** NHSC standards require you to validate advertising claims. Do your students feel that the claims were valid? NHSC surveys of students during the process of re-accreditation always turn up a percentage of students who say the courses weren't as advertised.
6. **Employment statistics.** Vital information if you are offering vocational training. How many enrollees took the course to get a job? How many are willing to look for that particular job upon completion? What percentage of students got entry level jobs within 30 days, 6 months, etc.

7. **New course suggestions.** Students satisfied with entry level instruction may be candidates for more extensive training. Their opinion will influence your course planning efforts.
8. **Demographic information.** Just as important as knowing the market that we serve is understanding who the people are that are not taking our courses. For schools offering a broad range of courses, there may be whole new markets waiting to be tapped!
9. **Licensing claims.** Let's say your courses are designed to lead up to licensing as a dental hygienist. How did your graduates do when they took the licensing exams? Do they compare well against graduates of other schools? If you are offering non-traditional instruction in a field dominated by traditional classroom teaching, you need this type of student success and satisfaction information.
10. **Professional endorsements.** Are you looking for endorsement of your courses by recognized professional groups such as medical and dental societies, bar associations, etc? Your outcomes assessment data may provide important ammunition in receiving those endorsements.
11. **State/Federal approvals.** Similar to private industry or professional endorsements, good results from your OA program should help in maintaining State licenses to operate and could be an important factor in securing Federal insured financing.

Distributing OA Data

Now that you have all this good OA data, how are you going to control its release?

Establish guidelines for distribution of data internally. Are you going to have limited guidelines, or are you going to insist on information provided on a "need to know" basis?

Is the information sensitive? Or, rather, are you worried that unflattering information might get into the wrong hands? How do you control the distribution of important marketing data that might be removed by disgruntled employees?

Another aspect is how well you respond to requests for student data from State and Federal agencies who show up on your door step? Their seizure of information may or may not require a court order, so you need a plan or how to react to such a situation before it occurs. Obviously, you need to consult an attorney for advice on these matters.

A good OA program offers the opportunity to centralize a lot of important information that was previously contained in any number of file drawers throughout your school. Make sure the information is used wisely and above all, make sure that it is used!

Evaluating Your OA Program

As the OA program director, build into your program periodic check points so that you can step back from it's day to day operation and make critical assessments about how the program is functioning.

Be able to gather key personnel to solicit their inputs on the good and not so good points of your program. You will especially need to be informed about any new courses coming on line that might require a change in survey techniques.

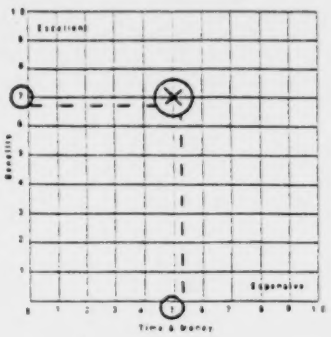
Perhaps of equal importance is an understanding by your education and students services departments that they have to keep outcomes assessment on their minds when they're creating new courses or implementing new student service procedures.

Be able to demonstrate to your satisfaction that OA is being effectively used in your school. Can you point to operational changes because of OA? Is there a course that was singled out by students as having outdated material? What was the educational department's reaction to discovery of that information?

In summary, the OA program should stimulate corrective response to problems while at the same time being the catalyst for change in your school operations and the courses that you offer.

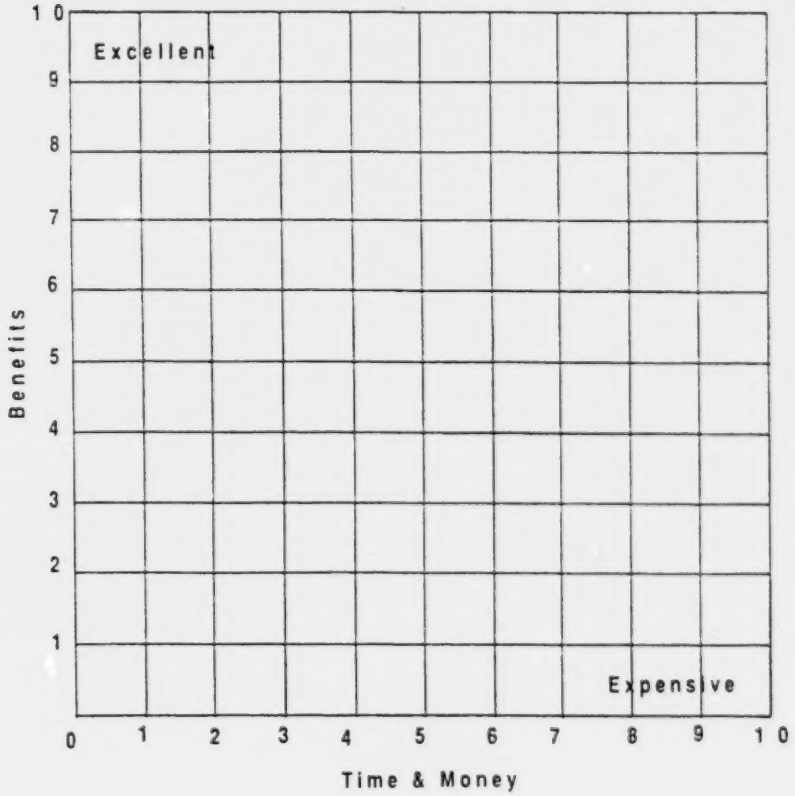
Please Evaluate This Training Course Using The Assessment Grid

Place an "X" on the grid below according to your assessment of the course you have just completed in terms of benefits (vertical scale) and time and money (horizontal scale).
Example: If on a scale of 0 to 10 you rate the benefits of this course a 7 and in terms of time and money a 5, you would place an "X" where the 7 and 5 scales intersect. See diagram at right.



Return to: NHAW Home Study Institute
P.O. Box 16790
Columbus, Ohio 43216

Title of Course: _____



SAMPLE CALCULATION

ESTIMATED MARGIN OF ERROR FROM A SAMPLE SURVEY

1. Select a confidence level.

This will state how sure you want to be that the total population profile will match that gotten from the sample surveyed, plus or minus the margin of error calculated. Typical confidence levels selected, are 95%, 98% and 99%. Say, we pick 95%. This means that we want to be 95% sure, have the odds be 95 to 5, or the chances to be 19 out of 20, that the finding of the sample surveyed are a true representation (plus or minus the sampling error to be calculated) of what we would find if we surveyed the entire population.

2. Calculate the expression -

$$p \pm Z_{\alpha/2} \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}$$

where, for a confidence level of 95%, or .95,

$$\alpha = 1 - .95 = .05$$

$$\alpha/2 = .025$$

$$1 - \alpha/2 = .975$$

then, looking up .975 for groups larger than 120, on a reference such as Table 12 of Biometrika Tables for Statisticians, vol. 1, edited by E.S.Pearson and H.O.Hartley, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1954) or Table III of Statistical Tables for Biological, Agricultural, and Medical Research, R.A. Fisher and F.Yates, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1953. we find the value, 1.960, so -

$$Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.96$$

To save the user of this manual from searching out the aforementioned references, the most common values you will need from them, for groups over 120, are -

For Confidence Level	$1 - \alpha/2$	$Z_{\alpha/2}$
50%	.750	0.674
80%	.900	1.282
90%	.950	1.645
95%	.975	1.960
98%	.990	2.326
99%	.995	2.576
99.8%	.999	3.090

Continuing with our sample calculation, say that 60% of the sample of 1000 people surveyed replied "Yes" to the question under analysis, then -

$$p = .60$$

$$n = 1000$$

and, entering all of the foregoing values in the expression -

$$.6 \pm 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{.6(1-.6)}{1000}}$$

$$.6 \pm 1.96 \sqrt{.00024}$$

$$.6 \pm 1.96 \times .0155$$

$$.60 \pm .03$$

- which means that the sampling error is estimated to be 3 points, and that we are 95% confident that if the entire population were asked the same question as was the sample of 1000, between 57% and 63% (60% ± 3%) of them would answer it "Yes".

RESOURCES

Altamuro, V. M. (1989). "How To Conduct Surveys". Toms River, NJ: Professional Improvement Publications.

Fifty steps to constructing, conducting and evaluating many different forms of surveys. A practical guide for those who must do the hands on work of developing student surveys for an assessment program.

Ewell, P. T. (1983). "Information on Student Outcomes: How to Get It and How to Use It". Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS).

One of a series of publications from NCHEMS on assessment for schools. An executive overview on the concepts of student outcomes, building a data base and applying outcomes in a decision making process.

Ewell, P. T. (1983). "Student-Outcomes Questionnaires: An Implementation Handbook". Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS).

Clearly oriented to the collegiate environment, this handbook provides worthwhile information on the construction and management of student questionnaires. Good reference for those who may be considering using outside firms to maintain a student assessment data base.

Ewell, P. T. (1984). "Conducting Student Retention Studies". Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS).

Handbook that concentrates on the aspect of tracking students through their educational experience. Why do students either stick with their study program or decide to drop out? Worth consideration in home study schools with lengthy programs requiring at least two years to complete.

Ewell, P. T. (Editor) (1985). "Assessing Educational Outcomes". New Directions for Educational Research, Number 47. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

A compilation of eight papers on aspects of outcomes assessment programs. Included are using outcomes assessments, perspectives and problems in student research, assessing and validating the outcomes in a college environment, etc. Written for the collegiate environment, but with some applicability and reference for home study schools.

Folger, J. K., Harris, J. W. (1989). "Assessment in Accreditation". Atlanta: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges.

Rather than present a "how to" manual on assessment, the authors of this book focus on the organizational and environmental factors affecting assessment implementation in schools. A thorough overview of how SACS views the assessment process in an accreditation environment.

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Schools. (1986). "The NCA OA/E Guide: A Handbook For Outcomes Accreditation/Evaluation Schools". Boulder, CO: author.

Written to overview an accreditation option for NCA schools, this could be an important handbook for home study schools serving the elementary, high school fields (especially those with combination programs). Primarily written to assess school performance rather than student outcomes.

National Home Study Council
1601 18th Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20009